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Population Ageing, the Intergenerational Conflict, and Active Ageing Policies – a Multilevel Study of 27 European Countries

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Abstract In the scientific and the public debate demographic ageing is sometimes perceived as an unstoppable “grey tide” which will inevitably lead to a conflict between the old and young generation. In this paper we empirically evaluate whether we find any evidence for an intergenerational conflict in Europe and which factors might influence its severity. In particular, we answer the following questions. (1) Is there a conflict between the interests of the younger and the older generation? (2) Does the strength of the conflict increase with population ageing? And finally, (3) can a policy of Active Ageing, i.e. better integrating older generations into society, moderate the conflict? We answer these questions in a comparative study of 27 European countries using data from the Eurobarometer 2009. Our results show a moderate conflict between generations. Compared to spending preferences of the younger generation, older people are more likely to support increased spending for old age at the expense of educational spending. Contrary to expectation, generational

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conflict does not increase with population ageing. Linking country differences in the strength of the generational conflict to the degree of population ageing with multilevel regression techniques we do not find any evidence that the conflict is increasing. In a final step of our analysis we evaluate the potential of generational policies - measured with the Active Aging Index - to mitigate the generational conflict. Intergenerational conflict is weaker when older people actively participate in the political life and are visible in society, suggesting Active Aging policies as a means to mitigate intergenerational conflict.

Keywords Intergenerational conflict · Active aging · AAI · Ageing societies · Pension policies · Eurobarometer

Introduction

In January 2013 Austria held a nation-wide referendum on the abolishment of compulsory military or community service. Among the young voters a majority voted for the abolishment whereas two thirds of the older voters favoured a compulsory military or community service. The numerical predominance of older voters resulted in the retention of the compulsory military or community service. In a nutshell, the majority of older voters forced the minority of younger voters to do military or community service. This example succinctly illustrates what many politicians, journalists, and some scientists predict as a result of population ageing: an increasing conflict between generations and a “gerontocracy” in which older people will dominate the political agenda at the expense of younger generations (European Commission 2009, Kotlikoff and Burns 2004, but see also Tepe and Vanhuyse 2009).

Existing literature on this topic examines differences in policy preference between the young and the old generation and focuses on single, age-related areas of the welfare state (e.g. education or pensions). As these studies provide ambiguous results (Busemeyer et al. 2009, Goerres and Tepe 2010, Street and Cossman 2006), we want to evaluate whether there is any evidence for an intergenerational conflict in Europe. We empirically scrutinize the claim that the strength of the conflict will increase as population ages. We argue that what matters for intergenerational relations is not the mere number of old people but how actively they participate in society. We, thus, explore whether a policy of Active Ageing, which aims at better integrating older generations into society, has the potential to attenuate an intergenerational conflict.

We contribute to the literature in two ways. First, we propose a new way of measuring policy preferences. We combine individual spending preferences for typical, age-related policies (educational and old age spending) that have been analysed separately in existing research. Such a combination allows us to tease out the trade-off people might make between these age-related areas of the welfare state. Second, this paper tests the intergenerational conflict hypothesis at the macro level. Evaluating the potential of generational policies to mitigate the conflict, our paper aims to shift the focus from misleading descriptions of population ageing as an “unstoppable grey tide” to ways how policy makers can shape the process of population ageing.

The Intergenerational Conflict: Determinants of Political Preferences

The theoretical literature on political preferences distinguishes two types of individual motivations for supporting welfare policies: self-interest and values (Fong et al. 2005; Iversen and Soskice 2001). In the following we will deduct our hypotheses from the theoretical and empirical literature on the individual determinants of political preferences. Whereas the self-interest perspective predicts a generational conflict over welfare spending, the values perspective assumes that intergenerational solidarity will attenuate such a conflict. Previous research strongly suggests that the socio-economic and institutional context also shapes individual preference formation (Svallfors 1997, Jaeger 2013, Naumann 2016) and that the strength of the two rival mechanisms of attitude formation, self-interest and values, depend on the socio-economic context. We depict arguments why population ageing might increase the generational conflict and discuss the potential of active ageing policies to moderate the generational conflict.

According to the self-interest perspective people support a policy if they expect to benefit from it, whereas they oppose a policy if their individual costs linked to a policy are higher than the respective expected benefits. Pensions and educational policies are the areas of the welfare state in which the interests of younger and older generations are most likely to be opposed (Busemeyer et al. 2009; Goerres and Tepe 2010). Educational spending mainly goes to younger generations but is mostly financed by all generations via taxes. Pensions only go to people above a certain age. Again all cohorts either contribute more or less equally (in tax financed pension systems) or only the younger contribute to the financing (in pay-as-you-go pension systems). Following the argument of a rational actor younger people should be in favour of higher spending for education, but oppose more spending for pensions (pro-young bias). Older generations, in contrast, should support higher spending for pensions and oppose those for education (pro-elderly bias).

H1: Intergenerational conflict over welfare state spending:

Older people prefer higher spending for 'their' welfare programmes (e.g. pensions or health care) while younger people prefer higher spending for welfare programmes that benefit the young (e.g. education or family policy).

Previous studies testing the self-interest argument show ambiguous results. Few studies indeed find age related differences in attitudes towards welfare state spending (Mehlkop and Neumann 2012), whereas the majority of studies find no variation between younger and older generations in welfare state attitudes (Busemeyer et al. 2009; Keck and Blome 2008; Naumann 2014b; Svallfors 2008; Wendt et al. 2011) or voting behaviour (Bonoli and Häusermann 2009; Goerres 2008).

One reason why the self-interest perspective finds only weak or no empirical support is the neglect of values and a too narrow understanding of self-interest (Mau and Veghte 2007). Above and beyond age-based interests, intergenerational solidarity within the family is likely to shape attitudes towards the welfare state (Goerres and Tepe 2010). Older people might support spending for education and family policies since they have children or grand-children. Moreover, they might have benefited from

support from their parents (or the state) in the past and support the young out of reciprocity. This intergenerational solidarity within families might have turned into a social norm thereby being extended to the societal level (see moral economy literature, e.g. Mau 2004, Sachweh 2012). Such norms help to overcome a too narrow, too myopic self-interest and provide incentives for individuals to act in their individual (and the societal) long-term interest (Kinder and Kiewiet 1981). This last point addresses the second critique, i.e. that the self-interest perspective too narrowly focuses on short-term utility maximization. People approaching retirement might favour educational spending over additional spending for pensions because they expect that investment in education will lead to sustainable economic growth. Such economic growth will help to ensure the financing of the pensions they expect to receive in the future (Esping-Andersen and Sarasa 2002).

Despite these shortcomings the hypothesis of an intergenerational conflict has gained renewed attention against the background of population aging (Busemeyer et al. 2009, Emery 2012, Kotlikoff and Burns 2004, Naumann 2014a). Increasing life expectancies and decreasing fertility rates are leading to aging populations in Europe, North America and in parts of Asia. This aging of societies will affect amongst others the labour market (D'Addio et al. 2010), the financing of pension systems (Wilke and Börsch-Supan 2009) and increase costs for health and long term care (Moody 2006, Hofäcker et al., 2015). These developments will gradually increase the financial burden for the younger generation and might also threaten the long-term sustainability of the welfare state. An increasing financial burden for the working generation paired with an (expected) decrease of benefits from the welfare state in old-age might lead to a withdrawal of support for old-age related policies and a dwindling intergenerational solidarity among the younger generation. At the same time opposition to retrenching reforms is assumed to be very strong among the beneficiaries (Pierson 2001). Conflict lines should, thus, be running between, on the one hand, groups who benefit from the welfare state and who will defend 'their' programmes and, on the other hand, the net-payers who are more inclined to accept reforms and cut-backs. Conflict (and opposition to reform) might be even more severe if additional benefits for some groups or social policy programmes (e.g. education and families) are possible only at the cost of other groups or social policy programmes (e.g. the elderly). Thus, we expect that the strength of the intergenerational conflict is correlated with the share of older people in a society.

H2: Population ageing and the intergenerational conflict:

The older a society, the stronger is the intergenerational conflict.

A dominant perspective in this debate is to link the generational conflict to the demographic aspect of population ageing only (Busemeyer et al. 2009, Emery 2012, Naumann 2016). Recently the policy oriented debate started to focus on the potential of population ageing and to stress the opportunities policy makers have to shape the process of population ageing. Above and beyond the mere number of old people in a society it might be equally important for the strength of an intergenerational conflict how older people participate and are engaged in the economic and social life of a society.

Active ageing policies aim at increasing employment, participation in society, and healthy and independent living of older people (Walker and Maltby 2012). The effect of active ageing policies on the generational conflict is twofold. On the one hand younger people might perceive the active participation of older people in the political life but also on the labour market as threatening. For example, the younger generation might not feel their interests represented well by older politicians and fear an increasing under-representation in the democratic process (Berry 2014). As a reaction younger people should increase their demand for policies from which they expect to benefit, intensifying the intergenerational conflict (H3a). On the other hand, an actively ageing population shows the potential of older people for society. Older people support their children with childcare, they do voluntary work and contribute to the cultural life (Kohli and Kühnemund 2005). An increasing participation on the labour market but also a better health status of older people reduces the costs for the health care and the pension system (Lain and Vickerstaff 2014). Moreover, the purchasing power of older people has become an important factor for economic growth. Active ageing, thus, also positively frames how older people and their contribution to society are seen. Active participation of older people might decrease perceptions of old people as a burden to society and point to older people's potential for economic and social life. These positive perceptions would rather decrease an intergenerational conflict over welfare resources (H3b).

H3: Active Ageing and the intergenerational conflict:

- a) Active participation of older people in a society increases the intergenerational conflict.
- b) Active participation of older people in society decreases the intergenerational conflict.

Data and Methods

Our analysis is based on data from the Flash Eurobarometer 269 "Intergenerational Solidarity" which was conducted in 2009. In each of the 27 European countries a sample of about 1000 randomly chosen respondents older than 15 years answered the questions. Given the hierarchical structure of our data – with information at the individual and at the country level –multilevel logistical regression models are the adequate tool of analysis (Hox 2010).

Dependent Variable – Spending Preference for Pension and Education

To measure a potential intergenerational conflict we compare older and younger generations' spending preferences for different areas of the welfare state. We focus on spending preferences for typical age-related policies, namely spending for old age or spending for education. We propose a new way to combine these two spending items allowing to tease out the trade-off people might make between age-related policy programmes. Respondents should rate the two following statements "Our government must make much more money available for pensions and care for the elderly" and "Our government is spending too little on education and young people compare to older

people” on a four point likert scale ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”. We combine answers to these two items into a single dependent variable: respondents that favour more spending for pensions and care for the elderly (agreement with the first item) but oppose spending for education and young people (disagreement with the second item) clearly have pro-elderly spending preferences (highlighted in Table 1) In the second group we summarize all other respondents. Table 1 shows the distribution of the two groups. It should be noted that our measure of pro-elderly policy support is a rather conservative measure in that it tends to underestimate the extent of pro-elderly bias. The share of respondents that support pro-elderly policies might even be higher as some of the respondents that support more spending in both areas might reveal a stronger preference for pension spending if they would have been faced with a direct trade-off between the two areas. An advantage of our way of measuring pro-elderly preferences is that it does not run the risk to misclassify a general welfare state supporter as pro-elderly.

Independent Variables

To answer our research question whether an intergenerational conflict exists we contrast two generations in our analysis. The younger generation (18–35 years old) has just entered the labour market or is still in education, while the older generation (older than 60 years) is at the end of the career or has already retired. Following the assumption of a rational and utility maximizing actor these two generations should have opposing welfare state spending preferences. As references group we use the “middle” generation (36–59 years old) which is already working and often has a family (for a similar classification of age groups see Busemeyer et al. 2009). An overview of these variables is given in Table A1.

Our main explanatory variables on the country level are the degree of population ageing and how actively old people participate in society. We use the old age dependency ratio as an indicator for population ageing (Eurostat 2015). The old age dependency ratio is defined as the ratio of people older than 65 per 100 people aged from 15

Table 1 Pro-elderly spending preferences: The trade-off between spending on old age or education, (absolute frequencies in parentheses). The shaded area shows respondents that explicitly favor a pro-elderly welfare spending

		Government should spend much more money for pensions and care for the elderly				
		<i>Strongly disagree</i>	<i>Somewhat disagree</i>	<i>Somewhat agree</i>	<i>Strongly agree</i>	
Too little spending on education and young people	<i>Strongly disagree</i>	9% (2117)	42% (9952)		23% (5549)	
	<i>Somewhat disagree</i>					28% (6620)
	<i>Somewhat agree</i>	7% (1578)	42% (10033)		25% (5848)	
	<i>Strongly agree</i>				24% (5763)	
		5% (1118)	11% (2577)	32% (7484)	52% (12501)	23680

to 65 years. It is a standard indicator for population aging (OECD 2011). The Active Ageing Index (AAI) will serve as measure for the efficacy of existing generational policies. It is a well-established tool to investigate how far a country has implemented the concept of active aging and how efficient are its policy measures in this area (Zaidi et al. 2012).¹

In addition to the main explanatory variables we include further control variables to test for potential confounding factors. On the individual level we control for gender and education since previous studies have shown that both are highly correlated with spending preferences (Goerres and Prinzen 2012). Overall economic success (Luttmer and Singhal 2011) and overall welfare state spending (Wlezien 1995) of a country influence individual spending preferences as well. Thus, we include the ratio of spending for pensions to the spending for education and the gross domestic product per capita in our models.

Results

In the following section we first give a descriptive overview on a potential intergenerational conflict in Europe and its determinants, and afterwards present the results of the multivariate analysis. Figure 1 shows the share of the population which supports an explicit age friendly spending policy, i.e. higher spending for pensions and a reduction of spending for education. We find a strong pro-elderly bias in the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Hungary and Sweden where a majority of respondents want to increase pension spending at the expense of educational spending, while only 20–30 % of respondents support such a pro-elderly spending bias in Germany, Poland, Czech Republic, and the Baltic countries.

Do old and young respondents differ in their spending preferences? Figure 2 shows the strength of the intergenerational conflict and indicates the difference between the older (> 59 years) and younger (< 35 years) age group in their support of the explicit age friendly spending policy. If for example 40 % of the older and 30 % of the younger generation are in favour of an age friendly spending policy the result would be 10 % (40–30). The strength of the conflict differs significantly between countries, the darker a country is shaded the stronger the generational conflict (Fig. 2). In Spain, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Denmark, Finland, and the South East of Europe the share of supporters of an explicit age friendly spending policy is much higher in the older age group than among younger respondents. Differences range from 6 to almost 21 percentage points (dark grey and black). In the centre of Europe the generational differences are less pronounced (indicated in grey). In the Benelux countries, Portugal,

¹ Consisting of four sub-indexes it ranges from 0 to 100. The higher the scores the older people participate in employment and social activities and the higher is their capacity to actively age. The four sub-indices are: Employment, Participation in Society, Independent, Healthy and Secure Living, and Capacity for Active Ageing. Indicators for the first sub-index are employment rate of older workers. The second is measured by indicators in the field of voluntary activities. The Independent, Healthy and Secure Living sub-index summarizes different indicators in the area of health and income. The last sub-index consists of life-expectancy and educational indicators. These four sub-indexes are added up to the overall AAI.

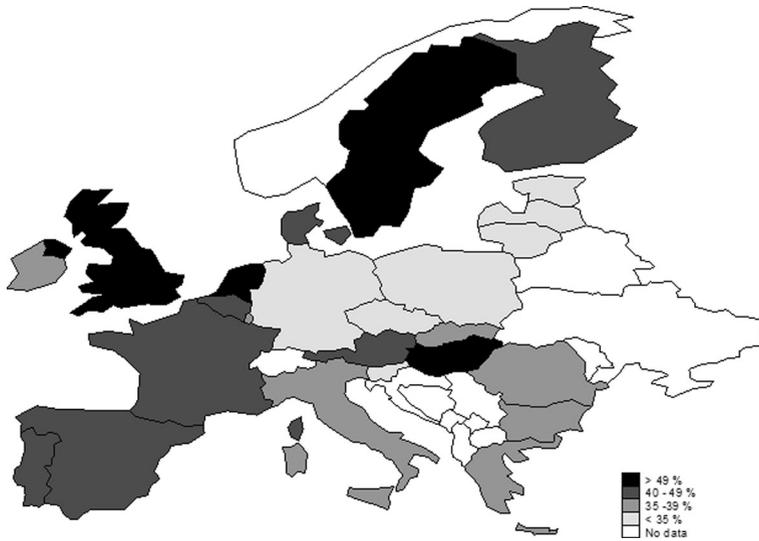


Fig. 1 Support for pro-elderly spending-Share of population in support for-elderly spending

Greece, Latvia, and Lithuania we find no substantial difference between the younger and the older age group (light grey).

After this descriptive overview we now focus on potential explanations for the cross country variation. Figures 3 and 4 show our two main independent variables at the country level, the Old Age Dependency Ratio and the AAI. On first sight we find no connection: A strong intergenerational conflict is found in “young” and “old” countries, as well as in countries which score high on the AAI and also in such scoring low on the AAI. In addition, bivariate correlation showed only very weak association between the

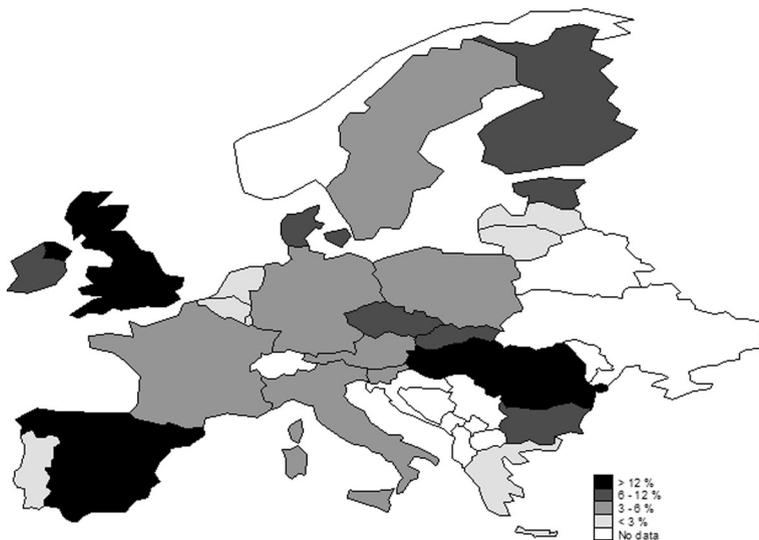


Fig. 2 The generational conflict in Europe-Differences between old and young respondents in support for pro-elderly spending

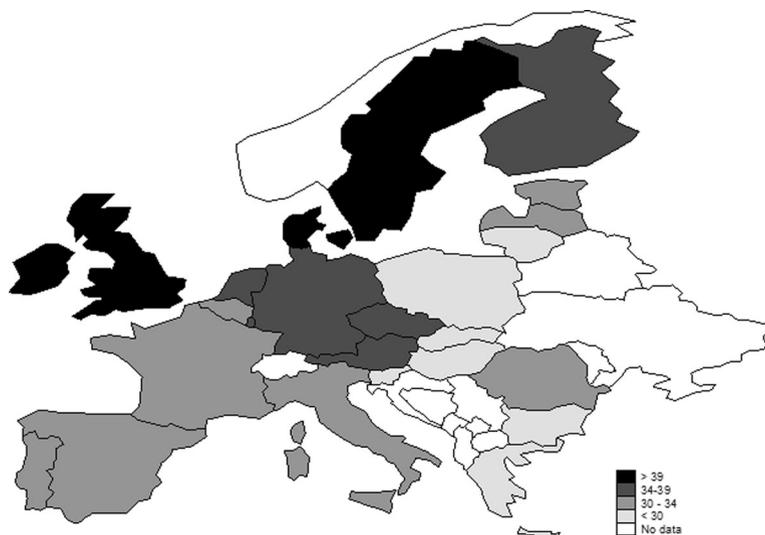


Fig. 3 Active aging index (0,100)

conflict and a society's age (-0.02) and the AAI (0.04). No clear pattern of countries regarding the strength of the conflict and its potential drivers could be identified.

Multivariate Results

In the next step, we present the results of the multivariate analysis. We tested the correlation of the intergenerational conflict (on the country level) with age (on the individual level) and with the Old Age Dependency Ratio and the AAI (both on the country level) while controlling for gender, education, GDP and overall welfare state

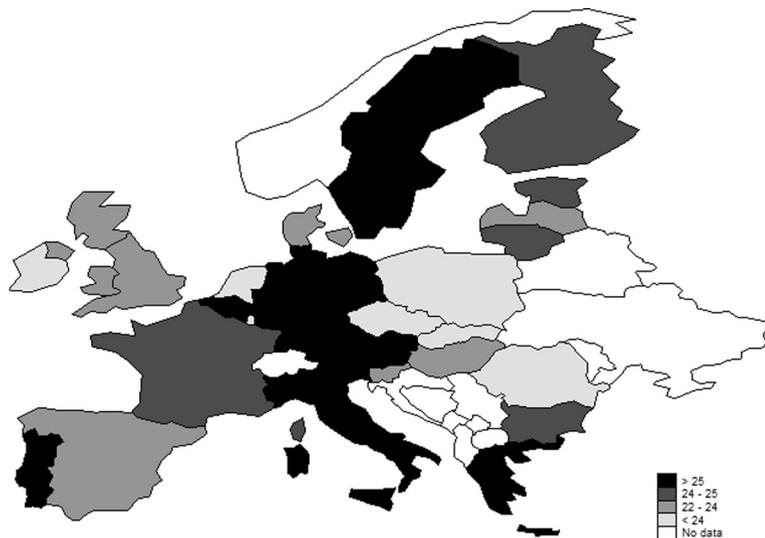


Fig. 4 Old age dependency ratio (Old [$>$] per 100 young [<66])

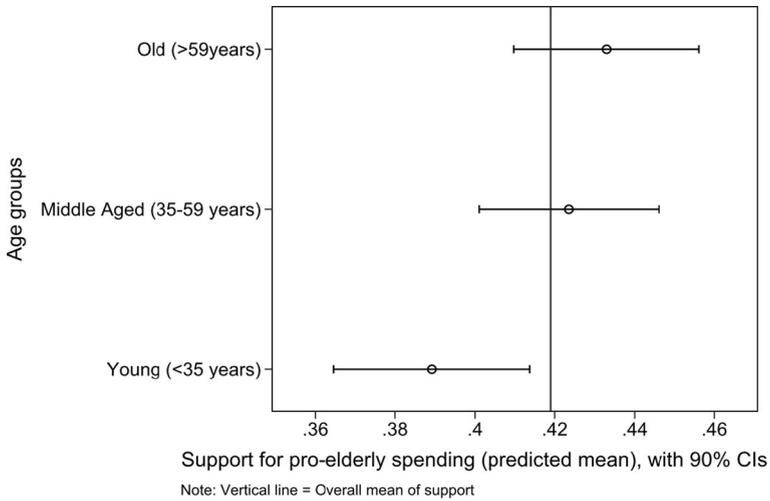


Fig. 5 The generational conflict in Europe over welfare spending – Differences in support for pro-elderly spending between old, middle aged and young respondents

spending. The results can be found in Figs. 5, 6 and 7 which are all three based on the multilevel logit models (Table A2) in the appendix.

Figure 5 shows the probability of a respondent to support an age friendly spending policy for different age groups. 41.9 % of the total sample is in favour of such an age friendly spending policy. While the share is slightly higher in the old age group (43.4 %) it is significantly lower for the younger cohort (39 %) indicated by the 95 % confidence intervals. This means that we find intergenerational differences in the preference how the welfare state should spend money.

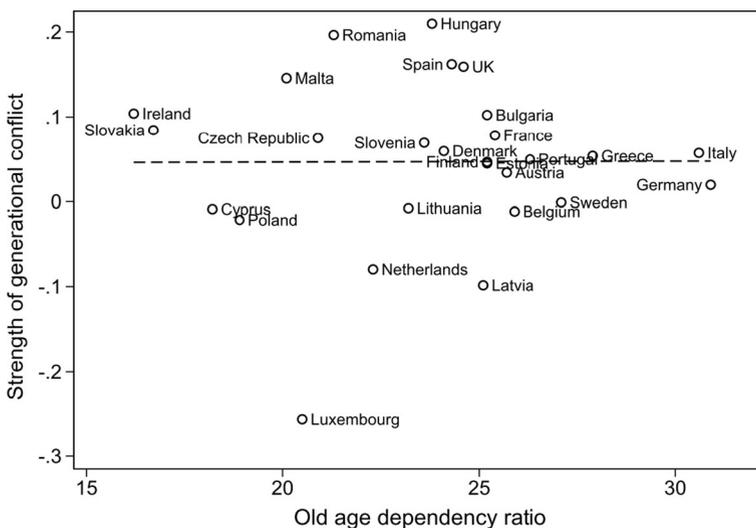


Fig. 6 Population Ageing and the intergenerational conflict in Europe – Differences in support for pro-elderly spending between old and young respondents (the strength of the conflict is estimated based on a multilevel model, see Appendix)

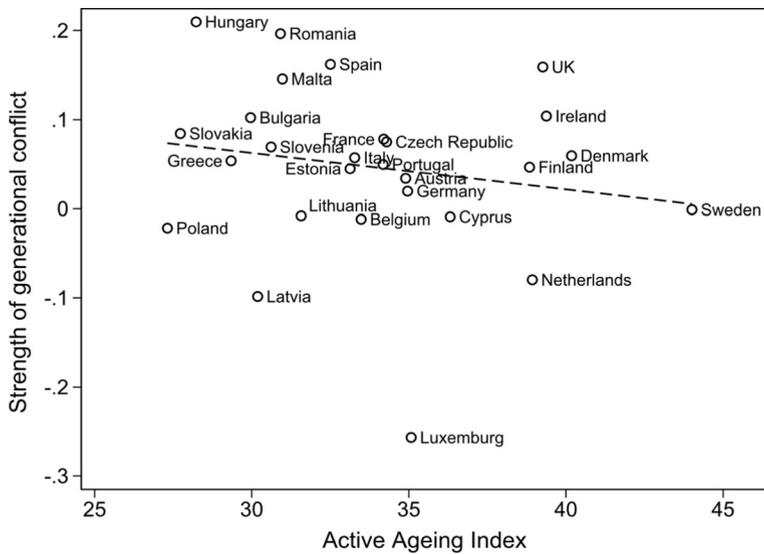


Fig. 7 Active Ageing and the generational conflict in Europe – Differences in support for pro-elderly spending between old and young respondents (the strength of the conflict is estimated based on a multilevel model, see Appendix)

Does this conflict increase as population is ageing? Is the intergenerational conflict stronger in countries with an older population? Figure 6 shows how the Old Age Dependency Ratio and the strength of the intergenerational conflict are related. As indicated by the fitted values line we do not find a substantial association between the two. Our results support previous studies that did not find any evidence that the intergenerational conflict increases with population ageing (Emery, 2012).

We argued that the intergenerational conflict might not only be influenced by the number of older people in society but how actively they participate in a society. Hypothesis 3a predicts that the more active the older generation is, the stronger the conflict is, while hypothesis 3b predicts the opposite – the more active the older generations is the weaker the conflict. Figure 7 shows a clear and significant negative correlation between older people's activity in a society, measured by the AAI, and strength of the intergenerational conflict. For example, moving from a country with a low participation of older people such as Slovakia to a country like Sweden where older people actively participate in society reduces the generational conflict by around 8 percentage points. This association holds even when controlling for compositional effects, i.e. individuals' gender and educational level and alternative explanations at the country level such as countries' GDP and the existing welfare state spending patterns. The more active older people are, the less the generations differ in their spending preferences. Based on this result we reject hypothesis 3a and confirm hypothesis 3b. It seems as if active participation of older people shows their potential for economic and social life and. Hence, they are not seen as a burden for society. The younger generations perceive older people's high employment rates, voluntary work and their active life style as benefit for society and, thus, also support welfare state spending in the area of pensions.

Conclusion

As societies are aging alarming warnings are heard that we soon will face a conflict between the older and younger generation over scarce welfare state resources. We shed light on a potential intergenerational conflict by contrasting the spending preference of the older and younger generation in specific age related welfare state areas (education and pension). Our results show that these differ indeed, with older people rather supporting and younger people rather opposing old age friendly spending policies. Contrary to our and public expectations the strength of this conflict is not correlated with a society's age indicating that demographic aging is not intensifying the intergenerational conflict. It seems to be older people's activity and societal participation which is crucial for the intergenerational conflict. The more active they are, the weaker the conflict. This finding leads to univocal policy implications. Policy makers have the means to mitigate the intergenerational conflict and in particular providing independent, healthy and secure living to the elderly seem to be most important in this respect (See Table A3). A policy of active aging will not only improve older people's quality of life, but also decrease the probability of an intergenerational conflict. In this respect, the AAI can represent a useful tool to monitor the impact of active aging policies implemented in a society.

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